



# **FROM FOOD DESERTS TO JUST DESERTS:**

*Expanding Urban Agriculture In New York City  
Through Sustainable Policy*

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## Executive Summary

In recent years, urban agriculture has become a common and desirable policy goal across U.S. municipalities. Whether cities seek to make more efficient use of land, pay closer attention to sustainability measures, or expand the availability of nutritional options to their residents, the practice has manifested itself in many forms, from small community gardens to green roofs to sophisticated, large-scale vertical farming operations. The benefits of urban agriculture are vast and increasingly well-documented on the environmental, economic, and social fronts.

### *Sustainability and Urban Agriculture In New York*

New York City, which has been home to one form of urban agriculture or another for over a century, has emerged as a leader in the current urban agriculture movement, with the largest urban agriculture system in the country. Some of the city's key successes include having more community gardens than any other city in the country, a growing greenhouse program in its schools, and a number of rooftop and vertical farms that are as high-tech as they are high-profile. On the policy end, New York's past two mayoral administrations have adopted two broad, long-term sustainability plans to address energy and resource conservation, promote renewable energy, improve air and water quality, encourage greener building, preserve green space, and provide better nutrition to its citizens. Administratively, New York has several offices dedicated to meeting these goals, including the Mayor's Office of Sustainability, Office of Recovery and Resiliency, an Office of Environmental Remediation, and an Office of Food Policy. Despite these commendable efforts, New York City could do much more to bolster its urban agriculture policies because the current laws and policies are not adequate to meet the needs of the city's individual residents or larger businesses.

### *Limitations of the Status Quo*

Rooftop farming is limited to commercial and industrial zones and school buildings; growing and selling produce on the same lot is prohibited regardless of the zone; no information is provided on whether indoor farming is allowed in any zone. In fact, the zoning resolution only mentions the word "agriculture" on a handful of its nearly 4,000 pages, thereby making urban agriculture "permissive" but extremely nebulous.

An administrative concern is that despite its numerous offices dedicated to sustainability, food safety, and preservation of green space, New York City lacks a specifically designated urban agriculture office or department, or a comprehensive and centralized resource on urban agriculture processes, programs, and protocols.

As a practical matter, New York City's current policies on urban agriculture are most beneficial to larger-scale, sophisticated farming projects that are legally allowed to operate in commercial and industrial zones. While continuing to encourage large-scale rooftop and warehouse farming is vital for the city's economy and for the urban agriculture industry as a whole, this practice does not sufficiently account for food deserts—lower income neighborhoods throughout the city with insufficient access to grocery stores or fresh produce. Indeed, the goals of larger farms that grow microgreens

for wholesale distribution to upscale grocery stores do not align with the goals of lower-income individuals who are primarily interested in growing their own food for personal consumption or having access to affordable fresh produce. Luckily, achieving the goals of both the state of the art aeroponic farmer and the individual consumer is not a mutually exclusive process and can be accomplished by amending the city's zoning resolution and establishing a comprehensive plan.

### *Toward a Solution*

Specifically, the city's current zoning resolution, which has not been summarily updated since 1961, should be amended and expanded to include urban agriculture uses in each zoning district, with clear and explicit definitions for each use and practice, such as "urban farm," "rooftop farm," "commercial farm," "indoor farm," "vertical farm," "basement farm," "aeroponics," "hydroponics," and "aquaponics." The zoning resolution should be amended to allow for conditional rooftop farming in residential districts and for conditional farming in all districts—or at least in residential districts most susceptible to food deserts. Lifting restrictions on selling produce on the same lots where it is grown should be considered, as should expanding "as of right" uses for smaller-scale urban agriculture practices and "accessory" uses. If restrictions cannot be lifted altogether, currently prohibited uses could be expanded into conditional uses, with the permit processes clearly described. Further, the city should consider creating a special zoning district category to account for urban agriculture practices so as to bypass existing zoning restrictions.

On the legislative end, New York City should write a Comprehensive Plan setting forth its urban agriculture objectives into law. The Plan should specifically address the needs of lower income communities by (a) explicitly allowing indoor farming, (b) expanding rooftop farming or permissive accessory uses to residential areas, or (c) establishing clear plans and means for providing sufficient amounts of affordable produce to such communities, either by designating more farmers markets or by expanding public assistance and/or supplemental nutrition programs. The Plan should also aim to establish accountability mechanisms to ensure that its goals are met in a reasonable manner.

This paper examines what other cities, including New York, have already done, and highlights a number of specific goals that should be considered to make this city's urban agriculture policy more robust and efficient. Given the sustained interest in expanding urban agriculture policy in New York City that has been expressed by individuals, business owners, policy experts, and local government officials, the city has a unique opportunity to put together a Comprehensive Plan that sets forth the above noted policy objectives.